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ABSTRACT

To explore attitudes having a direct relationship to written composition and mastery learning, 80 undergraduate college students were asked to respond to questions that centered on the issues of criteria for determining when a composition is complete, feelings associated with having to repeat a task, and the idea that one's best effort should be satisfactory performance. Responses indicated that quantity of thought was the major criterion in determining when a composition is complete. However, a mastery approach would require a composition to be expressed in such a way that communication is as important as number of ideas. Undergraduates indicated that they were willing to repeat a task provided they receive constructive feedback prior to the repetitive activity. Students who are expected to rewrite until a level of mastery is achieved must therefore be provided with a support system. Finally, students were divided on whether or not one's best effort should be satisfactory performance, some arguing that no one ever does his or her best. The attitude statements indicate that the initial encounter with mastery learning should be preceded by compensatory arrangements that would reduce stressful conditions. (TJ)

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PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE UTILIZATION OF A MASTERY APPROACH TO THE LANGUAGE ARTS

by

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Advocates of mastery learning maintain that such a system increases academic proficiency and drasticly reduces the corresponding number of students who receive grades below the "B" level. It is also claimed that such instructional schemes produce heightened student interest and more positive attitudes toward subject matter (Block & Anderson, 1975). Yet Torshen's (1977) review of research produced few specific studies that reported affective consequences of implementing a mastery approach to instruction. The primary evidence presented in support of mastery learning is anecdotal and impressionistic, consequently it is most relevant to specific environmental arrangements.

The merits of using a mastery approach to learning appear to be self-evident for closed sets that are structured in a hierarchical sequence. Perhaps that is why more experimental studies have been reported in mathematics than any other subject matter field. Whether the instructor applies the general principle of mastery in some improvised arrangement or employs a more systematic approach, such as that developed by Bloom (1971), academic achievement will largely be determined by the adequacy of the student's existing conceptual and attitudinal capacity in relation to an anticipated terminal behavior.

Although it is generally believed that positive attitudes are a natural consequence of academic success (i.e. Block & Anderson, 1975), the actual relationship between the two variables (attitude/success) is reciprocal rather than linear.

By placing undue emphasis on attitudes as subsequent events the behaviors resulting from the student's assessment of personal costs and benefits are overlooked. Mowrer (1971) concluded that antecedents of a task tend to evoke or repress desired responses while the subsequent events tend to accelerate or decelerate the rate of response. Students evaluate external stimuli, in this case an instructional arrangement, with respect to the relationship between their standard of reference and the characteristics of the task (Berkowitz, 1963). If the distance between the two positions is relatively small the stimuli will be assimilated toward the student's position. If, on the other hand, the stimuli are outside the individual's "latitude of acceptance" an effort will be made to rectify the imbalance by eraticating or at least reducing the perceived inconsistency (Bieri, 1967). Therefore, it appears that the relationship between the student's baseline attitudes and the characteristics of the task will, in large part, determine the degree of success and subsequent attitudes.

One of the most common methods of investigating attitudes is to ask questions that allow the student considerable latitude in responding, but the breadth provided by such an open-ended process is not without its limitations. The initial data derived from attitude statements are of limited projective value since it is only over an extended period of sampling that reliable patterns emerge (Guilford, 1954). Oppenheim (1966) also cautions that nuisance variables,

such as multiple meanings of words, may influence attitude statements in quite unexpected ways. Despite the afore mentioned restrictions, the fact that data resulting from attitude statements are situation specific and tend to reveal dominant attitudes of a group provides the instructor with information that may be of greater value than generalized conclusions obtained from other populations. A correlation of baseline attitudes with assessments of performance capabilities will generate a functional and realistic foundation for determining successive instruction.

The criteria for mastery of written composition includes high standards for both content and form. That is, it is expected that the completed composition will include both quantity and quality of ideas as well as comply to the conventions of our language (i.e. usage, spelling, puncuation etc.). Therefore, in an effort to explore several baseline attitudes having a direct relationship to written composition, undergraduates (N=80) were asked to respond to questions that centered on three basic issues: (a) criteria for determining when a composition is complete, (b) feelings associated with having to repeat a task, and (c) support of the idea that ones best effort should be satisfactory performance. Although the questions centered on written composition the attitudes associated with issues (b) and (c) are applicable to other aspects of the language arts in which a mastery format is utilized.

Responses to attitude statements indicate that quantity

of thought is the primary factor in determining when a composition is complete (N=69 or 86%) students seem to be concerned that they have adequately "covered" the topic in terms of number of ideas. However, they tend to reject word count controls on the basis that they represent unnecessary confinement. If factors such as correct spelling, puncuation or usage are considered, they are given low priority and, therefore, are not mentioned in the responses. There is also a tendency to consider composition as an exercise in self-stimulation; "My composition is complete when I've said all that I have to say." If student compositions are to have communicative value, the burden of interpretation seems to be placed squarely on the reader. In contrast, a mastery approach would consider a composition to be a vehicle whereby the writer communicates his/her ideas to others. The composition should be expressed in such a way that the reader has no choice but to recognize the writers ideas. To accomplish this goal the qualitative and quantitative aspects of composition must be in a state of relative balance. It appears that students need to modify their standard of reference for completion of the task if they are to comply with the qualitative requirements of writing mastery.

The observation of human performance strongly suggests that most people do not enjoy, and are not willing, to repeat a task that they feel has been completed in an acceptable manner. However, when undergraduates were asked how they felt about repeating an activity they interpreted the word

"feel" in cognitive (What do you think?) rather than affective terms. A surprising number of students (N=44 or 55%) expressed a willingness to repeat a task provided they received constructive feedback prior to the repetitive act. There must be a reasonable assurance that repeated efforts will result in superior performance. When the probability of beneficial results is low, this group of students would join those who are opposed to repeating a completed task (N=20 or 25%). Although there was a qualified willingness to repeat a task there was no indication that renewed efforts would be accompanied by positive feelings, nor did the responses suggest that the impetus for repetition was self-initiated. As a result, the responses did not identify student attitudes toward self-initiated proofreading or self-correction.

Ideally, subject matter would be arranged in a branching program and thereby assume the appearance of diversity, but most instructional systems are linear and necessitate the recycling of the same content. In those cases where the content is within a closed set there may be no alternative but to repeat the initial task. If students are expected to reread passages, rewrite papers or respell words until a level of mastery is obtained they also need to be provided with a support system. Instructors need to be reminded that the more we expect from students the more we must be willing to provide. Responses to attitude statements clearly show that students expect a high return for their investment of time, energy and patience. This would not appear to be an

unreasonable attitude.

It shouldn't be surprising that the anchorage categories of students encompass something less than perfection. Caretakers tend to anticipate and reinforce the young child's crudest approximations of target behavior. They respond to the neophyte's signals even if they are ill-formed constructions. This pattern of behavior is particularly noticeable during the first three years of life when the child is developing the productive aspects of language and parents are eager to communicate. As a result, children are taught that reinforcement is contingent upon an approximation of the desirable, and if such actions are assigned the subjective value of being "one's best effort," they will be accepted without question. Schools do not generally counter such attitudes unless they have established a mastery approach to instruction. How many times have students asked their teachers for help, only to be told that they should,"Just do your best?"

Undergraduates are quite evenly divided in their support or rejection of the idea that one's best effort should be satisfactory performance. Approximately half the students assess the statement in terms of an immediate situation; at any given moment one can only do his/her best since it is impossible to do "bester." The remaining members of the group question if we ever use our maximum potential. They also express the point of view that "we are all in process," we are capable of changing and therefore capable of improving

our best efforts. These are rather sophisticated interpretations that probably result from accumulated learning and exposure to Rogerian thought.

When performance levels are set a priori, as in the case of mastery learning, it is likely that one's best effort will frequently fall short of the mark. If this factor and the expressed attitudes toward completion and repetition are considered collectively, one is lead to the conclusion that baseline attitudes and the performance expectations of a mastery approach are frequently in direct conflict.

The selection and sequencing of various emotional responses to a discrepant and stressful condition is, of course, a function of the student's personality and existing environmental factors. However, as previously noted, stimuli that are outside the student's latitude of acceptance will be met with efforts to eradicate or reduce the inconsistency. If mastery conditions are perceived as a threat to the student's well-being he/she is likely to exhibit one of the following reactions: (a) anger may result in aggressive behavior, (b) fear may contribute to avoidance, and if neither fight or flight are possibilities the fear and anger may change to (c) anxiety (Rusech, 1973). It should be noted that moderate levels of anxiety can produce an exhilarating condition (i.e., mountain climbing) and are probably consistent with the efficiently operating personality (Travers, 1967). However in the current context, anxiety is considered to be of such a magnitude that it results in a generalized

feeling of hopelessness. It has been found that the sensations of anger, fear and anxiety are not necessarily supported by logic, reason or direct experience. Mandler and Watson (1966) point out that it is possible to anticipate helplessness if a new or unusual situation occurs or which there is no apparent solution. Any situation which threatens the adequacy of existing response sequences, including mastery learning, can be anxiety-producing.

Attitude statements generated by this study; coupled with personal interviews, written course evaluations and direct observation of student behavior, indicate that the initial encounter with mastery learning should be preceded by compensatory arrangements that would reduce discrepant relationships. Programs that are initiated without adjusting for baseline attitudes are likely to produce varying reactions of fear, anger or hopelessness rather than the high levels of academic success and positive attitudes reported by Block and Anderson (1975).

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